

"Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture" opens in Boston: as some artists play on the collapse of sculpture into commodities, others underscore the prominence of design and display.

Like other movements in the sixties, Pop and Minimalism worked against traditional notions of artistic composition, and they did so partly through a serial mode of production: one image after another, as often in the silkscreened paintings of Andy Warhol; "one thing after another," as often in the sculptural units of Donald Judd. This serial ordering also oriented Pop and Minimalism to the everyday world of serial commodities more systematically than any previous art. In our world of consumer capitalism, the primary term of consumption is not necessarily the use of a given product so much as its difference as a sign from other such signs. According to the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, it is often this "factitious, differential, encoded, systematized aspect of the object" that we consume more than the object as such; it is the brand name that triggers our desire, the commodity-as-sign that becomes our fetish.

### Codes of consumption

Once serial production and differential consumption penetrated art in this manner, distinctions between high and low forms became blurred in a way that exceeded any thematic borrowing of imagery or sharing of subject matter. Evident in Pop and Minimalism, this blurring became explicit in the early eighties when artists like Jeff Koons (born 1955) and Haim Steinbach (born 1944) equated art works with commodities directly; this work first came to broad attention in a 1986 show titled "Endgame" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. With his early basketballs half-submerged in aquarium tanks, Koons produced an almost Surrealist affect of ambivalence [1], yet his glossy ad campaigns and luxury objects thereafter seemed bent on little more than self-promotion, as Koons appeared to delight, nihilistically, in the commodity fetish and the media celebrity as the historical replacements of the auratic art work and the inspired artist. In effect he acted out what Walter Benjamin had predicted long ago for capitalist society: the cultural need to compensate for the lost aura of art and artist with "the phony spell" of the commodity and the star. Here his most famous precedent among artists was Andy Warhol. "Some company recently was interested in buying my 'aura,'" he wrote in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (1975). "They didn't want my product." It was left to Koons to make this redefinition of aura as "phony spell" not only the subject but the operation of an art career.



1 • Jeff Koons, *Two Ball 50/50 Tank* (Spalding Dr. J Silver Series, Wilson Supershot), 1985  
Glass, steel, distilled water, and two basketballs. 159.4 x 93.3 x 33.7 (62 1/4 x 36 3/4 x 13 1/4)

And if Koons, a stockbroker-turned-artist, presented commercial hype as the contemporary substitute for artistic aura, then no-less-savvy artists like Damien Hirst (born 1965), the most notorious of the "Young British Artists" who emerged in the late eighties and early nineties and gained notoriety with the 1997 "Sensation" show at the Royal Academy in London, did much the same thing with media sensationalism. Koons had only placed kitschy products in his cases; Hirst went the whole hog and presented sectioned animals in his containers [2]. In this regard the outraged opponents of these artists played right into their hands, for together they produced a packaged simulacrum of artistic provocation.

Whereas Koons focused on the fetishistic aspect of the commodity-sign, Steinbach concentrated on its differential aspect.



2 • Damien Hirst, *This Little Piggy Went to Market, This Little Piggy Stayed at Home*, 1996  
Steel, glass, pig, formaldehyde solution, and two tanks, each 120 x 210 x 60 (47 x 82 x 23 1/2)

A 1985 piece titled *related and different* displays a pair of Nike basketball shoes alongside five plastic goblets, as if to suggest that Air Jordans were a contemporary version of the Holy Grail. This is typical of his work: to set selected products on simple shelves or pedestals in clever juxtapositions of shape and color in a way that shows them to be "related and different"—related as commodities, different as signs. Steinbach frames art objects in these terms too: they are presented as signs to be appreciated—that is, consumed—as such. Like Koons he positions the viewer as shopper, the art connoisseur as commodity-sign fetishist, and celebrates the idea that our "passion for the consumerist code" (Baudrillard) seems to subsume all other values—use-value, aesthetic value, and so on. With Steinbach this code of consumption is first and foremost a matter of design and display, and its logic appears total, able to absorb any object, however bizarre, into any arrangement, however surreal. In his work such oppositions as functional and dysfunctional, rational and irrational, which structured the definition of the modern object since the Bauhaus and Surrealism, appear to be collapsed, which is indeed one "endgame" played out by this kind of "commodity sculpture."

These artists "pretend to engage in a critical annihilation of mass-cultural fetishization," Benjamin Buchloh has argued, but in doing so "they reinforce the fetishization of the high-cultural object even more: not a single discursive frame is undone, not a single aspect of the support systems is reflected, not one institutional device is

touched upon." In this account they do not confront the contemporary status of the institution of art; rather, they perform (as one practitioner, Ashley Bickerton [born 1959], once boasted) a "strategic inversion of the deconstructive techniques" developed to critique this institution by such artists as Marcel Broodthaers, Michael Asher, and Hans Haacke in the sixties and seventies. If those older artists had expanded the presentational device of the readymade object in order to reflect on conditions of exhibition, these younger artists returned the readymade to its status as a product—indeed, they often transformed it into a luxury commodity on display.

Yet not all artists concerned with the commodification of art in the eighties succumbed to this cynical inversion of the old avant-garde device of the readymade. Allan McCollum (born 1944) demonstrated the same positioning of art—as object of desire and as vehicle of prestige—as did Koons and Steinbach, but he withheld the goods, so to speak, and so invited us to consider conventions of display as triggers of consumption. His *Surrogate Paintings* [3], which consist solely of minimal frame, mat, and rectangle in lieu of the usual image, are so many blank signs for easel painting (first painted in acrylic on wood, they were later cast in plaster); while his *Perfect Vehicles* (1985), urns cast in solid Hydrocal and painted in enamel bands of different colors, are equally generic tokens of sculptural objects. As with several subsequent series, both "the Surrogates" and "the Vehicles" come in various sizes and in extreme





3 • Allan McCollum, *Surrogate Paintings*, 1978–80  
Acrylics and enamels on wood and museum board, sizes vary

numbers: McCollum oversees a studio that functions, like a cottage industry, somewhere between a workshop and a factory, and he uses it to produce a superabundance of unique multiples that frustrates rather than satisfies our desire. In this way he calls up differences in production at the same time that he provokes reflections on consumption, and so carves out a place of critical distance on various kinds of making, showing, viewing, and owning from within an economy that works to foreclose awareness of alternative modes of production and distribution altogether.

John Knight (born 1945) has also worked to develop the deconstructive techniques of institution-critical art, with an eye not only to the increased commodification of art but also to its literal incorporation into big business, indeed *as* big business. This led him to mimic the forms of design and display in advertising and architecture that became pervasive during the Reagan-Thatcher years when corporate merging and culture marketing expanded exponentially. Thus for “Documenta 7” (1982), the international exhibition in Kassel, Germany, Knight made eight logotypes from his own initials abstracted in italicized Helvetica font (which he deemed “the ultimate mainstream corporate font”), mounted them in wood relief, and covered them with color reproductions of travel posters (in one piece he substituted an advertisement for a California bank). In this way he pointed to the historical recuperation of modernist forms of abstraction, relief, and collage “for the dissemination of the ideology

and the products of corporate postwar culture” (Buchloh). At the same time, positioned in the two main staircases in the principal hall of “Documenta,” his logotypes equivocated between art work and commercial logo, between private, individual signature and public, anonymous sign. In a sense Knight incorporated his own initials here, a rhetorical move that underscored the double condition that critical artists faced at this moment: not only the corporate domination of art-world institutions (along with the financial manipulation of art collectors like Charles Saatchi in England, whose first line of business is indeed advertising), but also the forced revival of Expressionist painting. His *Mirror series* [4] reflected on both developments, and suggested that the apparent subjectivity of the painting served as small compensation (and no little mystification) for the actual sovereignty of the corporation. According to Buchloh, Knight shaped his pseudocorporate logos in different geometric forms faced with mirrors so as to “remind us of the ultimate corporate reality that controls and determines the most secluded interior reflection. In the same manner, the trivial domesticity of the mirrors leaves no doubt that the aesthetic withdrawal from its public social function has no other place than that of the private framed reflex.”

Other artists at the time also underscored the corporate designing of our identities. For example, Ken Lum (born 1956) has arranged standard modern furniture in bizarre positions—sofas standing, leaning, sometimes combining and coupling—as if they



4 • John Knight, *Mirror series*, 1986  
Installation view

had taken on a life of their own and displaced their human owners. And Andrea Zittel (born 1965) has explored the modularization of our contemporary habitats in a series of mock models of streamlined offices and homes. Still other artists have sought to reclaim a subjective dimension in this new order of everyday life under mega-corporations. Like Knight, Lum, and Zittel, Barbara Bloom (born 1951) has also mimicked cultural forms that shape social identity. Among other things, she has produced posters and advertisements, book jackets and film trailers, in a sly sort of deconstructive mimesis of these genres of the culture industry. “In all my work ‘seeming’ and ‘appearing as if’ play a large role,” Bloom explains, “but this looking ‘like,’ this chameleonic means of achieving my purpose is, on the surface, a first impression. The images, often through irony, offer commentary upon the medium in which they are placed and cultural images (clichés) in general.”

- Bloom developed her early work out of feminist concerns of the late seventies and early eighties, which focused on questions of fetishism and spectatorship; in a 1985 installation titled *The Gaze*, which took the form of a showroom, she worked to catch our fascination with designer shoes in the act. However, her later work is not so distanced; especially in her exhibitions staged as private collections Bloom has introduced fragments of stories, both fictional and (auto)biographical, through photographs and books, personal items and household objects, often redolent of the past [5]. Here rather than adopt the guise of the public curator, as many contemporary artists have done, she performs the role of the private collector. Other artists had taken up this part before her, or combined it with that of the curator (Broodthaers, for example), but Bloom is concerned less to critique the gallery–museum nexus than to transform it into an alternative theater to explore the secret lives of words and things.
- Like Walter Benjamin before her, Bloom sees the collector as a figure who resists the reduction of the object to either use-value or exchange-value, and who mobilizes a personal kind of fetishism—what she calls “the potency of detail”—against the abstract fetishism

of the commodity-sign. “Collectors are the physiognomists of the world of objects,” Benjamin wrote in “Unpacking My Library” (1931); they elevate the commodity “to the status of allegory,” finding hidden stories therein. Bloom performs a similar narrativization with her objects: “I seem to spend an inordinate amount of time contemplating whether an object can be imbued with enough meaning to become a stand-in for a person or event.”

In the eighties, artists responded to the market pressures and corporate interests in the art world (and beyond) in dialectically different ways. Some acted out these financial arrangements in their work, as if to exacerbate them might be to damage them somehow; while others attempted to reflect on these new forces critically, and to develop rather than to collapse the framing effects of the readymade device in order to do so. Although economic conditions shifted, temporarily, after the minicrash of the stock market in 1987, the mid-nineties saw another round of capitalist expansion, and some artists began to focus less on the commodification of art, which they considered a given by this time, than on the ubiquity of *design*, or the manner in which objects or practices are so often recoded, subsumed into a greater ensemble, turned into an element of decor or lifestyle. This shadowing, even doubling, of avant-garde art by “good design” is not a new story; it has haunted abstract art through much of its development. In this regard consider the trajectory of the Bauhaus, the most celebrated of modernist schools: if the Bauhaus did indeed transform the arts and crafts as they were traditionally taught, it also facilitated, as Baudrillard has argued, “the practical extension of the system of exchange-value to the whole domain of signs, forms and objects.” This is one version of “the bad dream” of modernism—that its utopian transformations of art forms might be recouped as market advances in fashion and other commodity lines.

Some contemporary artists, such as Jorge Pardo (born 1963) and Karim Rashid (born 1960), appear to take this recuperation as a given, and to work within the parameters of a design logic. In this





5 • Barbara Bloom, *The Reign of Narcissism*, 1989  
Mixed media, dimensions variable

space of design, categories and terms that a generation ago were held in productive contradiction—for example, “sculpture” versus “architecture” in site-specific art—appear as compounds without much generative tension, as in the many combinations of pictures, objects, and spaces in Installation art. In this state of reversion, site-specific art becomes a kind of ambient art, and the situational aesthetics developed by institution-critical artists like Michael Asher transmutes into a sort of design aesthetics. Indeed, artists like Pardo and Rashid use elements of decor—color-coded tile and wallpaper, super-sleek fixtures and furniture—to subsume the space of art into a total environment. In this sense, if some artists once pushed sculpture out into the realm of architecture, others now submit sculpture to the dictates of design.

Yet here too, as with the heightened commodification of art in the eighties, there are dialectically different responses to this pervasive design logic. The artist-architect Judith Barry (born 1949) has long appropriated aspects of this logic for critical purposes in her installations and exhibitions. And rather than exacerbate the implosive

effects of this logic, some artists, such as Glenn Seator (1956–2002) and Sam Durant (born 1961), have sought to recover the “expanded field of sculpture” in the sixties, and to resist the totality of design through an explicit remotivation of site-specific practices. In the case of Durant, this has meant a recovery of the site/non-site dialectics of Robert Smithson, but now read through funky references to both subcultures and mass culture. In the case of Seator, it meant a recovery of the architectural cuts of Gordon Matta-Clark, but now performed in a manner in which the exposed architectural history becomes a systematic index of an exposed social history.

#### FURTHER READING

Brooks Adams et al., *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993)

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000)

David Joselit (ed.), *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent American Painting and Sculpture* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986)

Lars Nittve (ed.), *Allan McCollum* (Malmö: Rooseum, 1990)

Peter Noever (ed.), *Barbara Bloom* (Vienna: Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, 1995)

▲ 1967a, 1970

● 1970

▲ 1967a, 1970

● 1967a

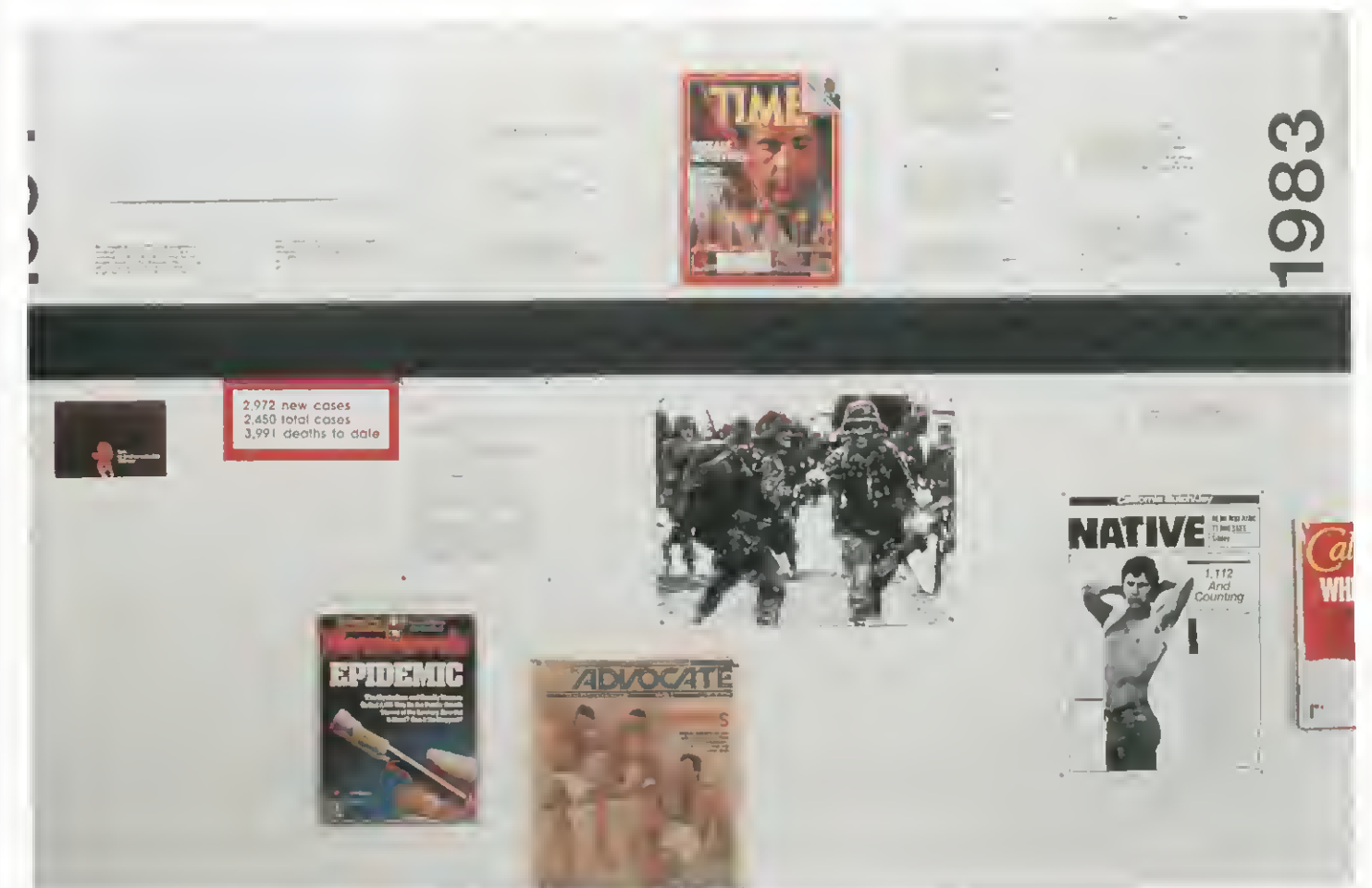
# 1987

The first ACT-UP action is staged: activism in art is reignited by the AIDS crisis, as collaborative groups and political interventions come to the fore, and a new kind of queer aesthetics is developed.

In response to conservative governments in the United States, the United Kingdom, and (then) West Germany, the early eighties witnessed a resurgence of art devoted to progressive politics, the most important since the height of the Vietnam War. Different events overlapped to provoke this resurgence: military interventions in Central America, corporate takeovers on Wall Street, the continued threat of nuclear holocaust, the phobic attacks of the religious Right, backlashes against civil rights and feminist gains, slashes in welfare and other social programs, and—most tragic of all for the art world—the AIDS epidemic, the indifference of most

governments to it, and the brutal scapegoating of gay men in particular on account of it. As the decade wore on, political art in the United States was also galvanized by a number of beatings and other violent events that were racially and/or sexually motivated, as well as by ideological conflicts that pitted the art world against the very governmental agencies founded in part to support it—above all the National Endowment for the Arts.

These responses were framed in two basic ways. The first tended to a “representation of politics,” in which social identities and political positions were treated as given contents, to be communicated as



1 • Group Material, *AIDS Timeline*, 1989

Mixed-media installation

▲ Introduction 2, 1984a



immediately as possible. The second tended to “a politics of representation,” in which these identities and positions were treated as constructed representations, to be interrogated on formal as well as ideological levels. Thus, while some artists worked to present political problems in direct ways, others brought poststructuralist critiques of representation to bear on them. One danger of the first approach was that it sometimes confirmed the stereotypes that it sought to challenge; and one danger of the second was that its very sophistication sometimes obscured its own critique.

The reactionary turn in politics was accompanied by one in aesthetics, as was manifest in the resurrection of old forms like oil painting and bronze sculpture; the common enemy here was the radical transformations in the sixties of politics and art alike. And yet, even as humanist myths of master art and artists were revived, the art world was given over to market forces like never before, especially to the financial manipulations of collector-investors (like the British advertising executive Charles Saatchi) who extended the rampant privatization of the public sphere under Reagan and Thatcher to the institutions of art. Among other changes for the worse, this meant the trumping of curators and critics by collectors and dealers as arbiters of artistic importance and value.

In resistance to the ideological regression in art as well as the overt manipulation of its market, some artists pursued “collaborative, collective, cooperative, communal projects,” as one New York group called COLAB put it. Often these collectives set up alternative spaces, sometimes for temporary exhibitions in abandoned storefronts, sometimes to engage communities not served by the art world and removed from its centers. One example of guerrilla exhibitions in New York was “The Real Estate Show” (1980), which combined ad hoc objects and installations by local artists with wall drawings and graffiti by neighborhood children in a derelict storefront in the East Village owned by the city. Almost immediately the show was closed by the authorities, who thereby only underscored the real-estate problems that the event sought to dramatize. One example of community spaces in New York was Fashion Moda, a storefront gallery in the South Bronx set up by Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis to connect various artists with local residents (some of whom were portrayed, in painted plaster busts, by John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres). The activities of such collectives as Group Material in New York and Border Art Ensemble in San Diego also ranged from message shows and guerrilla interventions (such as illegal postering) to community projects [1].



2 • Leon Golub, *Mercenaries (IV)*, 1980  
Acrylic on canvas, 304.8 x 585.5 (120 x 230 1/2)

▲ 1975, 1977 ● 1977, 1980, 1984b ■ 1976

The mission statement of Group Material—“to maintain control over our work, directing our energies to the demands of the social conditions as opposed to the demands of the art market”—captures the spirit of this movement of politically motivated artists who sought to be socially site-specific as well, a spirit that has lived on in other groups like RePo History.

The resurgence of political art associations in the eighties revived interest in such precursors as the Art Workers’ Coalition, which was formed at the height of the Vietnam War in order to advance the cause of an artist union and to protest the absence of woman and minority artists in exhibitions and collections. The spotlight also fell again on engaged artists like Leon Golub, who updated his graphic paintings of the atrocities of American soldiers in Vietnam with the new subjects at hand, such as the mercenaries of the undeclared “dirty wars” of the eighties [2]. Intercut with this representation of politics, however, was a politics of representation, which led some artists to mimic Situationist strategies of *détournement* in particular—that is, the reworking of public symbols and media images with subversive kinds of social meanings and historical memories. Thus, from 1980 onward the Polish-born Krzysztof Wodiczko (born 1943) projected specific images at night, at first in guerrilla fashion, onto different monuments and buildings redolent of political and financial power: nuclear missiles on war memorials, presidential pledges of allegiance on corporate buildings, homeless people on heroic statues, and so on [3]. His goal was to counter the official languages and to expose the suppressed histories of these architectures, with the result that under his projections they often seemed to erupt, symptomatically, with repressed contents and connections. Others like Dennis Adams (born 1948) and Alfredo Jaar (born 1956) used similar strategies. In his site-specific bus shelters, Adams confronted passersby with photographs of political demons who still haunt the present, such as the anti-Communist demagogue Joseph McCarthy and the Nazi executioner Klaus Barbie. In a related set of substitutions, Jaar displaced the slick subway ads that glorify businesses and banks at home with graphic phototexts that detailed their real work of exploitation abroad.

### Agitprop appropriations

The most effective of these neo-Situationist interventions were made by the numerous artist groups associated with ACT-UP, the acronym of AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, founded in March 1987 “to undertake direct action to end the AIDS crisis.” As sophisticated in poststructuralist critiques of representation as the aforementioned artists, these groups (among them Gran Fury, Little Elvis, Testing the Limits, DIVA TV, Gang, Fierce Pussy) deployed different mediums and techniques depending on the occasion: bold posters of appropriated images and invented texts for specific demonstrations, subversive reworkings of corporate ads and newspaper pages for general circulation, video cameras to counter police abuse and media misrepresentations of ACT-UP

▲ 1957a



3 • Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Projection on South Africa House*, 1985  
Trafalgar Square, London, dimensions variable

activities, and so on. In doing so, they drew on a wide range of art practices—the photomontages of John Heartfield, the graphics of Pop art, the outrageousness of Performance art, the reflexivity of institutional critique, the image-savvy of appropriation art, and the caustic wit of feminist artists like Barbara Kruger. “The aesthetic values of the traditional art world are of little consequence to AIDS activists,” critic Douglas Crimp commented in 1990. “What counts in activist art is its propaganda effect; stealing the procedures of other artists is part of the plan—if it works, we use it.” Or, as a 1988 poster by Gran Fury put it succinctly, “With 42,000 Dead Art Is Not Enough: Take Collective Direct Action To End The AIDS Crisis.”

Some of these strategies were already at work in an anonymous poster that surfaced in downtown New York before the founding of ACT-UP: the mordant and mournful “Silence = Death” (1986). These two words were set in white type on a black ground with a pink triangle, the Nazi emblem for gays in the concentration camps. With the simple strength of its conviction, this sign indicted governmental inaction and public indifference regarding the AIDS epidemic (spelled out in a series of questions and exhortations in fine print at the bottom); indeed it equated this passivity with murder. At the same time, this sign turned the stigma of the

▲ 1920, 1956, 1960c, 1964b, 1971, 1975, 1977, 1980, 1992



pink triangle into an emblem of proud identity—a characteristic transvaluation, in the political development of an oppressed group, of an abusive stereotype (a similar reversal was performed on the word “queer” during this time). Scores of signs followed. Many, like “Silence = Death,” were made in various forms (posters, placards, T-shirts, buttons, and stickers), and all were used as tools for organizing and reporting, raising consciousness and support, surviving and fighting back.

ACT-UP groups knew that the ideological war over AIDS was fought through the media as well as in the streets, and with a membership of many artists, film- and videomakers, architects, and designers, they devised signs and events that not only critiqued and corrected the media but also played on its procedures and propensities. Some used graphic horror, such as a 1988 poster by Gran Fury that showed only a handprint in blood red, the sign of a murderer, with the texts “The Government Has Blood On Its Hands” above and “One AIDS Death Every Half Hour” below [4]. Others used campy humor, such as a 1989 poster, also by Gran Fury, that substituted the word RIOT for the old Pop icon of LOVE painted by Robert Indiana in 1966 (the poster also responded to a prior substitution, by the Canadian group General Idea, of AIDS for LOVE). Designed to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, the uprising after an abusive raid at a Greenwich Village gay bar that is often taken to mark the beginning of the gay-rights movement, this sign was at once a call to memory and a call to arms, with the captions “Stonewall ’69” above and “AIDS Crisis ’89” below. ACT-UP groups also targeted bureaucratic officials and reactionary politicians (from commissioners of health to presidents), as well as drug-company profiteers. The infamous 1988 election pledge of George Bush against new taxes—“Read My Lips”—became a different kind of promise altogether in announcements of gay and lesbian “kiss-ins.” (When the group Gang substituted a beaver shot for the kissing couples, and added the words “Before They are Scaled,” “Read My Lips” took on yet another meaning—an indictment of the Bush gag-order against the discussion of abortion at medical clinics.) Such edgy appropriations were practiced by other artist collectives too, feminist groups like the Guerrilla Girls and antiracist groups like Pest, both of which posted statistically terse condemnations of sexual and racial discrimination in the art world and beyond.

### A queering of art

Empowered by ACT-UP, many gay and lesbian artists began to explore homosexuality as a subject of art in different ways—Robert ▲ Guber (born 1954), Donald Moffet (born 1955), Jack Pierson (born 1960), David Wojnarowicz (1954–92), Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–96), and Zoe Leonard (born 1961) prominent among them. (The death from AIDS of two of the six here is a small indication of the ghastly toll suffered by the gay and art communities.) In a sense these artists telescoped the different claims made by feminist artists ● of the first two generations, and “queered” them. That is, they

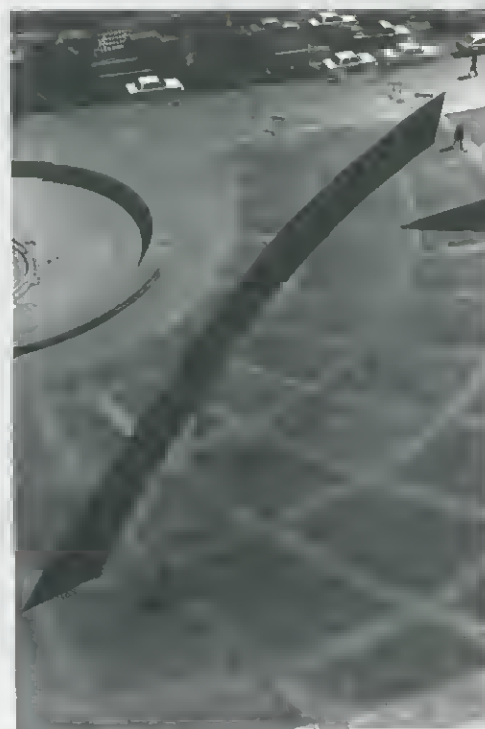


4 • Gran Fury, *The Government has Blood on its Hands*, 1988  
Poster, offset lithography, 80.6 x 54.3 (31¾ x 21¾)

explored homosexuality not only as a subjective experience that was essential in its nature (precisely what its enemies denied), but also as a social construction subject to cultural and historical variation.

More gentle than many of the ACT-UP appropriators urged on by Crimp, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who was also a member of Group Material, performed a queering of other artistic forms of the sixties and seventies. “In our case,” he once remarked, “we should not be afraid of using such formal references, since they represent authority and history. Why not take them?” And so Gonzalez-Torres did, with particular twists. He would arrange thousands of paper sheets, often lithographed with colors or images that bordered on kitsch (such as birds in the sky), in perfect ▲ stacks that recalled Minimalist volumes. Or he would spill thousands of gaily wrapped candies in the form (or antiform) of ● Postminimalist scatter pieces. Or he would paint an elliptical list of historical events in homosexual rights on public billboards in the ■ laconic manner of Conceptual art.

One such billboard appeared in 1989 at Sheridan Square in New York near the site of the Stonewall Rebellion. It consisted simply of a black ground captioned in white italics as follows: “People with



### The US Art Wars

In 1987 a US District Judge dismissed a lawsuit filed by Richard Serra to prevent the General Services Administration, a federal agency, from removing his sculpture *Tilted Arc* (above), which the same GSA had commissioned in 1981 for the Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan. “To move it,” Serra argued persuasively of his site-specific work, “is to destroy it.” Nevertheless, two years later *Tilted Arc* was moved under the cover of night. This was hardly the first case of the seizure or outright destruction of an art work, nor would it be the last, but it did open a new era of marked intolerance toward the work of advanced artists.

Also in 1987 the artist Andres Serrano (born 1950) was awarded a \$15,000 grant from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, which was funded indirectly by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). During his grant period, Serrano produced a Cibachrome photograph that showed a small plastic crucifix submerged in a bubbly amber liquid.

AIDS Coalition 1985 Police Harassment 1969 Oscar Wilde 1895 Supreme Court 1986 Harvey Milk 1977 March on Washington 1987 Stonewall Rebellion 1969.” Sooner or later one realized that all of the dates were landmark events—associations and demonstrations, trials and rulings, killings and uprisings—in the last century of gay life, but they were not in any order or sequence. The narrative was left to the viewer to construct, and the need to do so was underscored by the vacancy of the image, as if this history were always threatened by invisibility or illegibility.

Mostly on the basis of its title, *Piss Christ*, Serrano was accused of “religious bigotry” by the Reverend Donald Wildmon, director of the American Family Association. Again in 1987 the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Arts received \$35,000 from the NEA to assist in a retrospective of the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1947–89), which contained five images of homosexual acts. Fearful of controversy, the Corcoran Gallery canceled the Washington version of the show. The exhibition then moved on to Cincinnati where Dennis Barrie, the director of the Cincinnati Museum of Contemporary Art, was charged with peddling obscenity. Led by Senator Jesse Helms, conservatives in Congress exploited the Serrano and Mapplethorpe controversies to call for the outright abolition of the NEA, an attack to which its supporters responded but meekly.

The greatest struggle concerning art since the Vietnam era was in full roar; and at least three lessons could be drawn from these events: public support for contemporary art had eroded drastically; the religious Right had exploited this failure for its own purposes; and a cultural politics of homophobia had gripped the United States. The work of other artists singled out by Congress also foregrounded homosexuality (for example, the performance artists Holly Hughes and Tim Miller). All such art was deemed antifamily, antireligion, and anti-American. A literalism dominated these battles from the start. Many thought of *Piss Christ* as an actual desecration of Jesus by urine. “The pictures are the state’s case,” the prosecutor declared of the Mapplethorpe images as if their crime was self-evident. For its part *Tilted Arc* was once likened to a terrorist device.

The immediate upshot of these cases was that *Tilted Arc* was destroyed, an antiobscenity clause was inserted into NEA contracts (unconstitutionally, it was argued), and the case against Dennis Barrie was dismissed. But there were other ramifications. Contemporary art became political fodder for the Right; when not associated with obscenity or scandal, it was ridiculed as hype, and so a waste of taxpayers’ money in this respect too, with the result that many liberal supporters also turned away from art. An enormous pall was cast over public art in particular, with the NEA (and other institutions such as Public Broadcasting Stations and National Public Radio) under almost constant assault. And tolerance toward non-normative sexualities was met with murderous reaction at a time when AIDS therapies cried out for massive financing.

The candy spills are ambiguous in another way. *Untitled (USA Today)* [5] consists of three hundred pounds of candies in gaudy red, blue, and silver wrappers heaped in a corner. The piece flies in the face of taboos in art against touching, let alone eating. It also brings together stylistic cues usually kept apart: a Postminimalist-▲like arrangement (Robert Morris and Richard Serra, among others, did corner pieces) with Pop-like materials (the glitziness ● reminds one of Andy Warhol in particular). It even seems to undo, if only for a moment, the old opposition between the avant-garde



and kitsch. But these artistic allusions are complicated by more worldly ones. The subtitle points to the sugary news that the national paper *USA Today* delivers for our daily consumption, and consumption is literally foregrounded here, as a telling portrait of “USA Today” in another sense too. At the same time, the excess of the piece also conveys a sense of generosity, a spirit of offering so different from the cool cynicism of other uses of the readymade ▲ device by Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and others. Gonzalez-Torres solicits our participation in the register not only of consumption but of gift-exchange. Like his paper stacks, his candy spills are listed as “endless supply,” which reminds us, in a utopian sense, that mass production once had democratic possibilities latent within it.

For all its spirit of offering, however, this art is also imbued with the pathos of loss. In *Untitled (March 5th) #2* (1991), for example, two light bulbs are suspended, supported by their own intertwined cords—a simple testament to love threatened by loss, as one light must burn out before the other. (March 5 was the birthday of his partner, who died of AIDS in 1991, five years before Gonzalez-Torres himself.) And in a 1992 billboard we see only a black-and-white photograph of an empty double bed, ruffled where two bodies recently lay—an elegy to absent lovers that also condemns antigay legislation criminalizing the bedroom [6].

## Gender trouble

Like many of his generation, Gonzalez-Torres was influenced by poststructuralist critiques of the subject. Yet his art is concerned more with the making of a gay subjectivity than with its unmaking, for the simple reason that such a deconstruction would assume that gay identity is secure and central in a way that cannot be

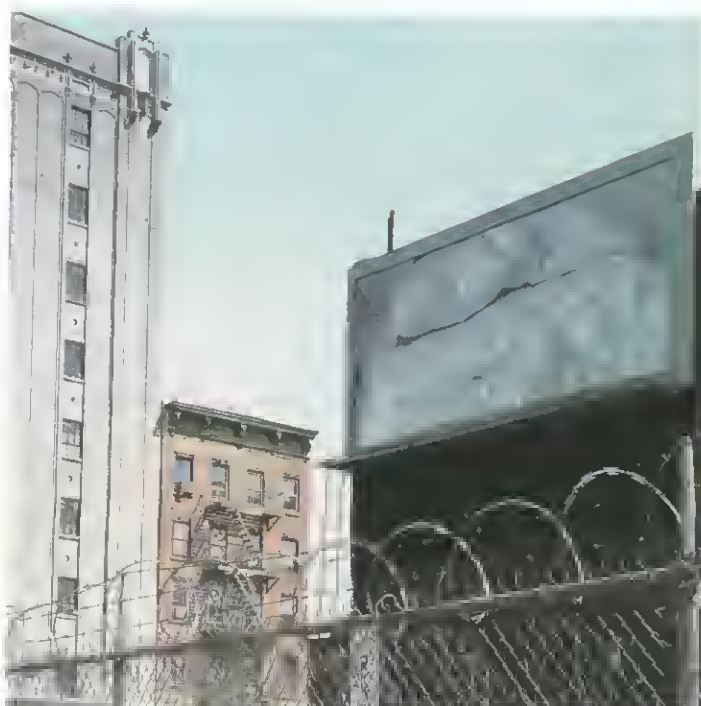
assumed in our heterosexist society. In his art, then, Gonzalez-Torres attempted to carve out of heterosexual space a lyrical-elegiac place for gay subjectivity and history. In her art Zoe Leonard finds such places in moments of “gender trouble” within straight society. In a 1992 poster made with the ACT-UP group Fierce Pussy, Leonard simply reframed a 1969 photograph of her second-grade class in Manhattan with the typewritten question “Are you a boy or a girl?” This is typical of her twofold tactic: to trouble gender, to expose what she calls the “the bizarreness” of its categories, and to construct a gay identity out of this trouble, to invent a lesbian history in the “place where expectations fall apart.”

Leonard plays with this “bizarreness of gender” in her photographs of a *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman* (1992) found in storage at the Musée Orfila in Paris. (She often searches the backrooms of medical and natural history museums for such “specimens.”) Yet the true bizarreness here is not the woman’s; for Leonard “it is her decapitation, the pedestal and the bell jar. What is disturbing is that someone or some group of people thought that was acceptable.” And so Leonard photographs the “specimen” in such way that she seems to gaze back at her spectators, to put them on exhibit. A similar reversal occurs in the photograph *Male Fashion Doll #2* (1995), a toy that Leonard found in a flea market in Ohio. She describes him as “a little drag queen,” with the face and body of a girl, as “usually rendered in plastic, completely sexless and pink,” but with a little mustache drawn on him—a figure of gender trouble that Leonard reframes as a question for us.

“I wasn’t interested in re-examining the male gaze,” Leonard has remarked; “I wanted to understand my own gaze.” But the objects of desire and/or identification of this gaze are not readily found in heterosexual culture—a vacancy that she seems to figure in her



5 • Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (USA Today)*, 1990  
Red, silver, and blue wrapped sweets, dimensions variable



6 • Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Billboard of Bed*, 1992  
Installed at a New York location



7 • Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit*, 1992–7 (detail)  
295 banana, orange, grapefruit, and lemon peels, thread, zips, buttons, needles, wax, plastic, wire, and fabric, dimensions variable

photographs of mirrors that reflect an empty glare more often than any image. As with Gonzalez-Torres, then, Leonard responds to the need not only to critique what is given as identity or history but also to imagine other kinds of constructions. This mandate may lead to archival work, to historical invention, or to both. For example, in her *Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1996), made in conjunction with the 1996 film *The Watermelon Woman* by Cheryl Dunye, Leonard helped to construct, through different genres of photographs artificially aged in the darkroom, the documentary life history of an imaginary woman, a black lesbian of the early 1900s who performed in Hollywood “race films.” “She is not real,” Leonard attests of Fae Richards, “but she is true.”

Along with her gender troublings and historical imaginings, Leonard has also worked toward an art of AIDS mourning, and in ▲ this project she is joined by such artists as Robert Gober and Gonzalez-Torres. Her *Strange Fruit* is a poignant instance of this coming to terms with loss: a community of hundreds of fruits whose peels she sewed back together once the fruit was extracted [7]. Inspired in part by her friend David Wojnarowicz, who once cut a loaf of bread in half, then stitched it back together with blood-red embroidery thread, *Strange Fruit* alludes not only to the old slang for homosexual but also to a Billie Holliday song about lynching—about hatred and violence, death and loss. “It was sort of a way to sew myself back up,” Leonard has commented; but the stitched peels attest more to holes than to healing, more to “the inevitability

of a scarred life” than to the possibility of a redeemed one. In this regard they are pathetic in a profound sense, “repositories for our grief.” This mnemonic model of art, this nonredemptive idea of beauty that allows for aesthetic sublimation but also works toward social change, is an important offering of artists like Gober, Gonzalez-Torres, and Leonard.

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Gerhard Richter paints *October 18, 1977*: German artists contemplate the possibility of the renewal of history painting.

In depicting the impact of the Baader-Meinhof Group's violent attempts to overthrow capitalism, Gerhard Richter's 1988 cycle of paintings titled *October 18, 1977* [1, 2] concluded a long, complex succession of German artists' attempts to reposition painting as a critical reflection on German history. While most postwar visual art, certainly in Europe and the United States, had avoided references to the immediate past, whether the prewar years or the war experience itself, it was German painting from the sixties onward that specifically tried to oppose the elision of historical references that the artistic neo-avant-garde in general mandated.

Within the context of German postwar art there were attempts to relocate painting in relation to history from as early as 1963, with the exhibition of Georg Baselitz's *Die Grosse Nacht im Einer* (and the subsequent scandal and censorship of the painting). First of all, with almost manifesto-like fervor, this type of work tried to reconstruct the site of a specifically German cultural tradition and to create some continuity for it by opposing all the standards that had been adopted in the first seven years of postwar visual culture—primarily the standards of *informel* painting and those imposed by the rise of American Pop art. Instead, Baselitz's work clamors to be seen as the result of a direct lineage linking it to pre-Weimar German painterly traditions, specifically to the legacies of Lovis Corinth and of German Expressionism. It thereby set out not only to skirt all postwar international avant-garde movements, but, typically and importantly, to avoid all photographically based practices that were specific to Weimar Dada, and to do so by reestablishing painting as the center of visual culture.

### The problem of history

Like Baselitz, Gerhard Richter had arrived in West Germany from the East German Democratic Republic, and, also like him, Richter had confronted the question of whether and how recent German history could be made the subject of visual culture. This was also in direct opposition to the *informel* abstractionists such as Winter, Trier, Götz, Hoehme—who were the teachers of Richter, Baselitz, and their peers—and their attempt to internationalize postwar German art. As early as 1962, Richter explicitly addressed the repressed legacy of Germany from 1933 to 1945 by painting a



1 • Gerhard Richter, *October 18, 1977: Confrontation 1 (Gegenüberstellung 1)*, 1988  
Oil on canvas, 111.8 x 102.2 (44 x 40 1/4)

portrait of Adolf Hitler (which he later destroyed). At the same time he began to collect the photographs that would form his huge *Atlas* project [3], in which images of private family narrative were increasingly juxtaposed with images of public German history. Over the years this resulted in the panels in which Richter collected photographs from Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen.

It can therefore be argued that the project to make German painting assume the function of dismantling postwar historical repression could be credited to both Richter and Baselitz. However, the means with which those strategies were implemented were in fact very different; the difference culminated in the late sixties in the opposition between the work of Richter and Anselm Kiefer.

On the one hand, by continuously looking at Nouveau Réalisme and the work of Andy Warhol—the French and American examples who served as the two poles of reference for his early



2 • Gerhard Richter, *October 18, 1977: Funeral (Beerdigung)*, 1988  
Oil on canvas, 200 x 320 (78 1/4 x 126)

work—Richter upheld the need to situate German painting in relation to all the other artistic practices that emerged in the early sixties. On the other, Baselitz almost programmatically denounced and denied both mass culture and photography, seeing them as conditions that painting had to counteract. Accordingly, the underlying argument (operative in work from Baselitz to the younger Kiefer)—that it was possible to establish an unbroken model of national identity and regional specificity right through from Corinth to Expressionism, to antimodernism, to Baselitz and Kiefer themselves—was refused by Richter, who insisted that all visual practices are determined both by their susceptibility to mass culture and by their entanglement in the postnational identity model of global cultural production.

Soon after 1962, Baselitz's work was seconded by numerous followers, among them Markus Lüpertz, all of whom tried to establish a specifically West German form of painting, to serve as the regional idiom of contemporary culture. At that time, links were already being made within painting between such a project and the problematic attempt to set up the foundations of a broader German cultural identity. Even so, Baselitz and his fellow neo-Expressionists avoided confronting the question of whether either of these two claims—for the continuity of national identity on the one hand or for the model of identity in cultural production on the other—were credible after fascism's destruction of any

model of national identity in cultural production (in particular the German one). Yet the establishment of this continuity—one that obscured the actual breakdown, the ruptures, the actual historical destruction that German fascism had brought about—was inherent in the project to renationalize and reregionalize cultural production. Thus, while painterly practices are not inherently reactionary, any attempt to project a continuity of experience outside the hiatus of fascism is necessarily both in and of itself a reactionary fiction.

It is along this axis of an opposition between the claim for a return to historical authenticity embedded in painting and the claim for a recognition of the various moments where that claim had been dismantled—by media culture, by political transformations, by the critique of the very idea that a model of national identity could be articulated by cultural production—that Richter and Kiefer can be situated. This opposition, as it reemerged in the eighties, when an international surge of interest in the fiction of a return to regional and national cultures made itself felt (specifically in the American reception of German neo-Expressionism) could be described as a question of mediation. First, since Kiefer's work explicitly addresses the legacy of German Nazi fascism, whereas Richter's focuses on events of German political life in the recent past (as in the *October 18, 1977* series), the issue of mediation occurs around the actual historical events the works address.





3 • Gerhard Richter, *Atlas: Panel 9*, 1962–8

Black-and-white clippings and photograph. 51.7 x 66.7 (20 3/4 x 26 1/4)

On that level, the question of the possibility of the representation of German history is already infinitely more complicated in Richter's work than in Kiefer's since, unlike Kiefer, Richter questions even painting's access to and capacity for representing historical experience. Secondly, mediation occurs at the level of painterly execution, since Kiefer's work claims access to German Expressionist painting as the means of executing his own project of historical representation. Richter, on the other hand, emphasizes both the degree to which history, if it is accessible at all, is mediated by photographic images, and also how not just the construction of historical memory but its very conception are dependent on photographic representation.

Richter's *October 18, 1977* cycle embodies a doubt, then, about the possibility of unmediated access to historical experience through the means of painting just as it asserts the possibility that painting could actually intervene in the process of critical, historical self-reflection. At the same time, the focus on the Baader-Meinhof Group as the subject of recent German history leads in a much more complicated

way to a prolonged reflection on the questions of postwar Germany. Writers on the post-1968 student movement and the events leading to the formation of the Baader-Meinhof Group had made it clear that this rebellion against the neocapitalist German state was triggered largely by an underlying horror at both the complicity of the postwar generation's participation in the history of Nazi Germany and its insistent refusal to acknowledge this complicity. Richter's reflection on the fate of the Baader-Meinhof Group is thus part of a larger project of understanding the formation of postwar German identity by addressing the second and third generations of that historical trajectory rather than by returning to the actual events of the Nazi past as they were staged in Kiefer's work.

The staging of such events emerged in Kiefer's first work, his 1969 *Occupations* series [4], in which he placed himself in various majestic landscapes (reminiscent of German Romantic pictorial settings) or in monumental architectural complexes and, from a relatively great distance, had himself photographed making the "Heil Hitler!" salute. The fact that this series was accomplished

photographically complicates the contradictions between Richter's and Kiefer's positions tremendously. First, Kiefer's work situates itself in an explicit dialogue with the photoconceptualist and performance practices of the sixties, but reorienting both of these within a tainted context of specific German historicity. That was the shock and the aesthetic interest of the project when it was first seen, primarily because it attempted to relocate European artistic practices—under the spell of either American Minimalism or Conceptualism in the late sixties—within the focus of addressing history in a specifically German context; and secondly, because the work tried to criticize the blind spots of the perpetual renovation of West German cultural practices in their approach to history. However, what is crucial in Kiefer's use of the photograph in this series is that unlike Conceptual art's approach to documentary photography at that time, Kiefer consistently treats the photograph as a hybrid, as a residue, as the one tool of representation that is just as discredited as painting. Thus there is a deeply antiphotographic impulse in Kiefer's collection of photographic remnants, as there is an antipainterly impulse in his use of nonpainterly materials such as straw, earth, and other matter in the construction of his paintings. Nonetheless, unlike Richter and artists of the Pop art generation, Kiefer never questions the authenticity or auratic originality of the painting as a singular object, or that of painting as a craft that generates a unique aesthetic experience. Indeed, as far as the continuous visual trope of the *Occupations* series is a reference to Caspar David Friedrich's German Romantic imagery (such as his *Wanderer above the Mist* [c. 1818]), photography is asked to participate in the sublimity of experience to which painting presumably had access in the early nineteenth century and to which neo-Expressionism assumed it could once more connect.

In analyzing Kiefer, the cultural historian Eric Santner proposes that Kiefer's strategies should be seen as a "homeopathic" approach to the conditions of repression. He hails Kiefer's project of confronting the legacy of thirties and forties German history as a necessary attempt to dismantle the repressive apparatus, the almost phobic inhibition, that was established in postwar Germany. In addition to blanking out the Nazi past, this repression also blocked any attempt by the German people actually to articulate their historical experience, by barring their access to the culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well, since the principal figures who made up German culture in this period had been considerably tainted by their abrogation in Nazi ideology. In his portraits Kiefer provocatively mingled figures ranging from Heidegger to Hölderlin, from Moltke to Bismarck, paintings that are seen by Santner not as a project of resuscitating the heroicization of a tainted history but as necessary attempts to open up the repressive apparatus that German culture had internalized and imposed upon itself in the postwar period. Santner thereby follows a similar logic to the one that had been developed by Hans Jürgen Syberberg in his seventies film *Hitler: A Film from Germany*, which was a similar project to open up the question of how German cultural history could be reestablished across the historical hiatus.

#### Jürgen Habermas (born 1929)

The last of the major German philosophers to emerge from the so-called Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Jürgen Habermas, was born in the year the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research was founded. At age the age of twenty-four, when still a doctoral candidate, he published a forceful critique of Martin Heidegger's infamous "Introduction to Metaphysics" (1935), which had announced that philosopher's conversion to Nazism, and which Heidegger had republished in 1953 without a single word of self-criticism, let alone an apology. In 1956 Theodor W. Adorno invited Habermas to join the recently reopened Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Under the tutelage of his mentor and the tradition of the Institute, Habermas would develop a synthesis of empirical social research and critical theory, addressing the particular conditions of postwar societies.

In his first groundbreaking work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), Habermas developed a concept that would have important ramifications for an art-historical understanding of the museum and the functions of the avant-garde: the bourgeois public sphere, tracing it from its emancipatory beginnings in the eighteenth century to its imminent dissolution under the impact of late corporate capitalism. In *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1968), his second major work, and one that would bring him international recognition, he formulated the concepts of communicative reason and communicative action as normative models for the subjective and sociopolitical realization of a present-day enlightenment project founded in language itself.

Whether or not one finds the model of the "homeopathic" approach to repression an acceptable one, Richter's work, in contrast, seems to take the inextricability of postwar German culture and its repression as its point of departure rather than claiming that it can be remedied. It also seems to take the various layers of postwar German cultural involvement with certain forms of internationalization, and of Americanized consumer culture (e.g., an Americanized model of Pop art production) as a historical condition that cannot be undone. With this act of specifically disclaiming any possibility of access to German cultural history, Richter's project both criticizes and also perhaps—as some artists and critics would say—perpetuates false internationalization and its intrinsic intertwinement with the act of historical repression.

Richter's paintings of the Baader-Meinhof Group members, the various scenes, the arrest, and the members' funerals, are necessarily from the very recent past. They represent what one could call the conclusion of the utopian aspirations of the "moment of 1968," in its calamitous ending with the supposed suicides of Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof in the Stammheim Prison in 1977. As a result of their iconography, the paintings have been widely recognized as an elegiac expression of German doubt and skepticism about the possibilities of utopian political transformation.



“Les Magiciens de la terre,” a selection of art from several continents, opens in Paris: postcolonial discourse and multicultural debates affect the production as well as the presentation of contemporary art.

In the eighties two exhibitions at major museums in New York and Paris served as lightning rods for postcolonial debates about art, and also focused new attention on the old problem of the Western collection and exhibition of art from other cultures. The first show, “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Modern and the Tribal” directed by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, consisted of brilliant juxtapositions of modern and tribal works that resembled one another in formal ways. For critics of the show, however, these juxtapositions only rehearsed the mostly abstract understanding of tribal art by European and American modernists, a noncontextual appropriation which the curators did not adequately question. To an extent the second exhibition, “Les Magiciens de la terre” (Magicians of the Earth), directed by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1989, took such critiques into consideration. It included only contemporary practitioners, fifty from the West, fifty from elsewhere, many of whom made work specifically for the show. In this way “Magiciens” struggled against some of the formalist appropriations and museological abstractions of non-Western art that were replayed in “Primitivism.” Yet for its critics “Magiciens” went too far in the opposite direction in its implicit claim of a special authenticity for non-Western art, a special aura of ritual or magic.

- “Who are the magicians of the earth?” Barbara Kruger countered in her skeptical contribution to the show. “Doctors? Politicians? Plumbers? Writers? Arms Merchants? Farmers? Movie Stars?”

### The nomadic and the hybrid

The year 1989 was a time for reappraisal of rhetoric on several fronts. Not only had the opposition between the First and Third Worlds already fallen apart, along with the dichotomy between metropolitan centers and colonial peripheries that had structured the relation between modern and tribal art. But so, too, had the opposition between the First and Second Worlds broken down, as signaled by the fall of the Berlin Wall in November. A “new world order,” as George Bush would dub it triumphantly after the Gulf War in 1991, was emerging—a mostly American order of released multinational flows of capital, culture, and information for privileged people, but of reinforced local borders for many more others.

This mixed development affected many artists profoundly. “Hybridity” became a catchword for some, as postmodernist critiques of modernist values of artistic originality were extended by postcolonial critiques of Western notions of cultural purity. These postcolonial artists sought a third way between what the critic Peter Wollen has called “archaism and assimilation,” or what the artist Rasheed Araeen has termed “academicism and modernism.” Content to be neither illustrators of folklorish pasts nor imitators of international styles, they attempted to work out a reflexive dialogue between global trends and local traditions. Sometimes this postcolonial dialogue demanded an additional negotiation between the often nomadic life of the artist and the often site-specific positioning of the project that he or she was asked to produce. Indeed, in this new time of cosmopolitanism, artists were on the move as much as artifacts were in earlier moments of primitivism.

The search for a third way had precedents in art of the eighties. Some artists involved in political groups had already rejected institutions of art, while others involved, say, in graffiti art like Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–88) had already played with signs of hybridity. This search was also supported by developments in theory, the most important of which were the critiques of Western self-fashioning and discipline-building in postcolonial discourse, which, after the Palestinian-American critic Edward Said (1935–2003) published his epochal study *Orientalism* in 1978, flourished in the work of theorists Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and many others. Of course, postcolonial art and theory has assumed diverse forms depending on context and agenda; between the United States and the United Kingdom alone, for example, there is a difference of focus on the subject of racism, inflected historically by slavery in the States, and by colonialism in Britain. There are also conflictual demands on artists and critics alike, who are often torn between the call for positive images of given identities long subjected to negative stereotypes on the one hand, and the need for critical representations of what the critic Stuart Hall has called “new ethnicities” complicated by sexual and social differences on the other. Sometimes this very conflict between notions of identity—as given naturally or as constructed culturally—is foregrounded, as in some work by black British artists such as the filmmaker Isaac Julien (born 1960), the photographers ■ Keith Piper (born 1960) and Yinka Shonibare (born 1962), and the



4 • Anselm Kiefer, *Besetzungen (Montpellier) (Occupations [Montpellier])*, 1969  
Eight photographs on cardboard

They have also been recognized as an allegory of the life and the history of the postwar German generation in its dual attempt to dissociate itself from and reassociate itself with German history, to overcome the repression of its fathers' generation and at the same time to develop countermodels and alternative political possibilities in the sixties radicalization and mobilization of leftist German thought. Richter himself has denied any aspect of these readings, refusing to be associated with any political interpretation of the paintings and claiming that if there is any connection between them and political thought, his aim was to articulate the problematic nature of all utopian projects.

### FURTHER READING

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## Aboriginal art

The most renowned form of Aboriginal art in Australia are the “Dreamtime” paintings produced in the northern and central regions (six Dreamtime artists from the Yuendumu community near Alice Springs were represented in “Les Magiciens de la terre”). In Aboriginal belief, Dreamtime was the period of Creation when ancestral beings shaped the land and its inhabitants, and Dreamtime paintings evoke these activities; the imaging of the creator-figures, which assume different forms (human, animal, and plant), tends to be more representational in the northern country, and more abstract, structured around vivid dots and lines, in the central area.

Dreamtime art is a good example of the third way between “archaism” and “assimilation” in contemporary global culture. On the one hand, its designs derive from motifs and patterns used in sacred ceremonies from archaic times (some paintings in rock shelters date back as far as 20,000 years). On the other hand, the efflorescence of Dreamtime paintings on canvas is little more than three decades old, spurred technically by the assimilation of acrylic paints in the early seventies and commercially by the market for exotic images among Western collectors whose own culture appears ever more homogeneous. (The market for Maori art also boomed in the eighties, as did the demand for the arts of Africa, the Arctic, Bali, and so on.) Thus, even as Aboriginal art is still based in the ceremonial practices of specific communities—each painting is in part a reenactment of a cosmology passed on from generation to generation—it is also shot through with global forces of touristic taste, cultural commerce, and identity politics.

However, like similar forms of hybrid art in Africa and elsewhere, Dreamtime painting has seemed to thrive on its

contradictions. Although it is often dismissed as a pidgin language, its mixing of indigenous idioms and foreign materials is part of its creativity. While its abstraction is attractive to elite tastes schooled in modern art, it also remains true to its own old traditions; and while it borrows such modern techniques as acrylic on canvas, it continues to elaborate ancient motifs otherwise applied to human bodies, tree bark, or the earth. In short, Dreamtime painting is an art that has remained authentic in its own terms even as it plays on the desire for “the authentic” on the part of outsiders. This use of forms is also not one-way: modern Australian artists have drawn on Aboriginal motifs too, and Qantas Airlines once painted one of its fleet in Aboriginal style. At work here then is a kind of exchange that, though hardly equal, must still be distinguished from prior episodes of exoticism in modern art, such as the use of African sculpture in the primitivist work of Picasso, Matisse, and others in the first decades of the century, as well as the projection of Native American art as primordial by some Abstract Expressionists, and the positing of an absolute *art brut*, or uncivilized “outsider art,” by Jean Dubuffet and others, both at mid-century. In the case of Dreamtime painting and other forms like it, there is a borrowing from the West by “the other” as well.

“There is a very strong connection between the use of symmetry in Aboriginal art and the powerful commitment to the balance of reciprocity, exchange and equality in Aboriginal art,” Peter Sutton, curator of the South Australian Museum, has remarked. At the same time we do well to remember that Aboriginal peoples of Australia, like other indigenous peoples on other continents, were long subject to forced resettlement and worse. To quote Frantz Fanon again: “The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers.”

painter Chris Ofili (born 1968). More often this conflict has led to divergent conceptions of the role of postcolonial art—to express and reinforce identity, or to complicate and critique its construction.

For Homi Bhabha the search for a third way in postcolonial art suggests a repositioning of the avant-garde—away from the pursuit of a utopian “beyond,” a vision of a unitary social future, and toward an articulation of a hybrid “in-between,” a negotiation between diverse cultural space-times. This theoretical notion has found its parallel development in the art of such diverse figures as Jimmie Durham (born 1940), David Hammons (born 1943), ▲ Gabriel Orozco (born 1962), and Rirkrit Tiravanija (born 1961).

Although different in generation and background, these artists have several things in common. All work with objects and in sites that are somehow hybrid and interstitial, not readily placed within the given discourses of sculpture or the commodity, or in the given spaces of museums or the street, but usually located somewhere in transit between these categories. To an extent photographs figure in this art, but like the other objects they are often residues of performative activities, or what Orozco calls “leftovers of specific situations.” This work thus extends across performance and instal-

▲ 2003

▲ 1959, 1961

● 1964a, 1967b

■ 1993c

lation too, without resting easily in either. To be sure, such an idiom of found objects, reclaimed debris, and documentary leftovers has precedents, especially in the sixties: one is reminded of the performance props of such artists as Piero Manzoni and Claes Oldenburg, ● the “social sculpture” of Joseph Beuys, the assemblages of archaic and technological materials in Arte Povera, and so on. (Importantly, Durham and Hammons, who were active by the early seventies, witnessed some of these practices, while Orozco and Tiravanija encountered them later in museum shows.) Nevertheless, all four contemporary artists are suspicious of the aestheticizing tendencies of such precursors. Although often lyrical as well, their aesthetic is even more provisional and ephemeral, in opposition not only to the old idea of timeless art but also to the new fixities of identity politics.

## Subversive play

To different degrees all four artists work with what the critic Kobena Mercer has called “the stereotypical grotesque,” and here they are joined by such African-American artists as Adrian Piper, ■ Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, Renée Green, and Kara

Walker. Essentially this means that they play with ethnic clichés, sometimes with light, acerbic wit, sometimes with exaggerated, explosive absurdity. Thus Durham has fabricated “fake Indian artifacts,” and Orozco, stereotypically Mexican skulls; Hammons has used loaded black symbols, and Tiravanija, stereotypically Thai cuisine. They have also engaged different models of the primitive ▲ object, such as the fetish and the gift, which they often juxtapose with “modern” products or debris. In some sense these subversively hybrid things are symbolic portraits of a similarly disruptive kind of complex identity.

Like the Performance artist James Luna (born 1950), who has acted out such stereotypes of the Indian as the warrior, the shaman, and the drunk, Jimmie Durham pressures primitivist clichés to the point of critical ridicule. This is most evident in *Self-Portrait* (1988), in which he summons up the smokeshop chief of American lore, only to tag this wooden figure with absurdist responses to racist projections about Native-American men. Durham first produced his fake Indian artifacts from old car parts and animal skulls; then he mixed in other kinds of commodity debris to produce “artifacts from the future” whose “physical histories ... didn’t want to go together.” One such artifact juxtaposes, on a craggy board, a portable phone and an animal pelt, on top of which is inscribed this quotation from the anticolonial revolutionary and theorist

Frantz Fanon: “The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers” [1]. Such hybrid art, which reworks the Surrealist object to postcolonial ends, is wryly anticategorical in a way that resists any further “settlement” into separate “zones.”

David Hammons also puts ethnic associations into subversive play. In the early seventies he did a series of images and objects with spades, at once a tool of manual labor and a slang word for African-American. One such object, *Spade with Chains* (1973), is especially provocative in its simultaneous suggestion of slavery and strength, bondage and resistance [2]. Hammons has since made many sculptures out of discarded or abject things that are culturally fraught, such as barbecue bones in bags, African-American hair wound into balls on wires and woven onto screens, chicken parts, elephant dung, and found bottles of cheap wine stuck on stripped branches or hung from trees. For some viewers these objects and installations evoke the desperation of the black urban underclass. Hammons, however, sees a sacred aspect in these profane things, a ritualistic power. “Outrageously magical things happen when you mess around with a symbol,” he has remarked. “You’ve got tons of people’s spirits in your hands when you work with that stuff.” His contradictory contemporary fetishes return art to the street, and at once demystify and reritualize it there.

1980–1989



1 • Jimmie Durham, *Often Durham Employs ...*, 1988  
Mixed media, wood, squirrel skin, paint, and plastic, 30.5 x 40.6 x 12.7 (12 x 16 x 5)

▲ 1931





2 • David Hammons, *Spade with Chains*, 1973  
Spade, chains, 61 x 25.4 x 12.7 (24 x 10 x 5)

Often indirect, the work of Hammons and Durham nonetheless possesses the edge of political commitment—Hammon's to the civil rights and Black Power movements, Durham's to the American Indian movement, in which he was an activist. Born of less confrontational times, the work of Orozco and Tiravanija is more lyrical. A 1983 performance piece by Hammons can help us track the directions that they take. In *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* Hammons presented several rows of different-sized snowballs for sale, next to other vendors of disused things on the street, in front of Cooper Union in downtown Manhattan [3]. This piece cut across private and public spaces, and confounded valued and valueless things, in a way that suggested that these distinctions are often artificial and only afforded by the privileged—a demonstration made by Orozco as well. At the same time, the snowballs, like the rubber-doll shoes that Hammons has also offered on the street, exist in a pathetic and parodic relation to commodity exchange, and point to a system of resale, barter, and gifts that Tiravanija has also explored as a critical alternative to the capitalist network of art.

One instance of each practice must suffice here. In a 1993 project for the Museum of Modern Art, Orozco invited neighbors in the apartment building north of MoMA to place an orange in each



3 • David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983  
Installation in Cooper Square, New York

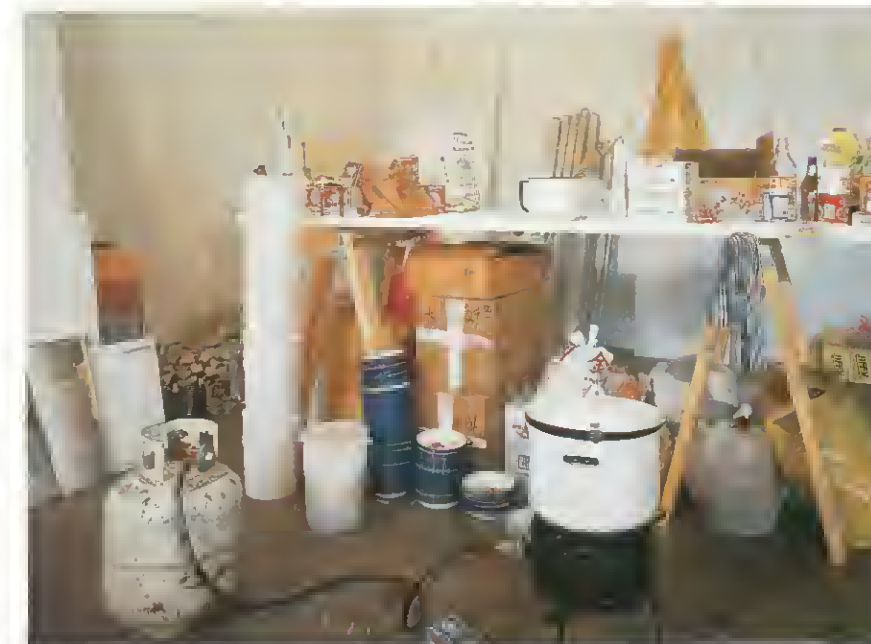
window sill that fronted the museum [4]. Here was a sculpture, wittily titled *Home Run*, that exceeded the physical space of the museum ball park. At the same time it brought into ambiguous contact different kinds of objects (perishable fruit on the window sills, bronze sculpture in the museum garden), agents (semiprivate residents and semipublic curators), and spaces (homes and museums). This is institutional critique with a lyrical touch, which, as with Tiravanija, does not mean that it is inconsequential.

In a signal piece of 1992, Tiravanija also used the dislocating of space and the offering of food as a means to confuse the normal positions and conventional roles of art, artist, viewer, and intermediary (in this case the art dealer). At 303 Gallery in New York he moved the private unseen rooms of the gallery, which contained the business office, the packing, and shipping areas, and all the other materials of its daily functioning, into its public viewing spaces [5]. The director and assistants at desks were on display in the central gallery, while Tiravanija worked over a stove in the hack gallery where he cooked and served Thai curry vegetables over jasmine rice to interested gallery visitors, often with conversation added. In subsequent works he has often played on such reversals of physical space, substitutions of expected function, and displacements of

4 • Gabriel Orozco, *Home Run*, 1993  
Installation in apartment building, view from the Museum of Modern Art, New York



5 • Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, 1992  
Tables, stool, food, crockery, and cooking utensils, dimensions variable



object exchange that invite one to reflect on the enforced conventionality of all of these categories in the art world and beyond.

"Not the monument," Durham has remarked of his work in a way that relates to the other artists as well, "not the painting, not the picture." Rather, he seeks an "eccentric discourse of art" that might pose "investigatory questions about what sort of things it might be, but always within a political situation of the time." In this way the work of these artists constitutes the equivalent of the "minor literature" defined by the French critics Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) and Felix Guattari (1930–92) in their 1975 study of Franz Kafka: "The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual and the political, the collective arrangement of utterance. Which amounts to this: that 'minor' no longer characterizes certain literatures, but describes the revolutionary conditions of any literature within what we call the great (or established)."

#### FURTHER READING

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- Laura Mulvey et al., *Jimmie Durham* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995)
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- Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on 20th Century Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993)



Fred Wilson presents *Mining the Museum* in Baltimore: institutional critique extends beyond the museum, and an anthropological model of project art based on fieldwork is adapted by a wide range of artists.

One way to understand some of the shifts in materials and methods over the last forty years of advanced art is to see them as a sequence of investigations: first into the constituent elements of a traditional medium like painting, as in the self-critical modernist painting advocated by Clement Greenberg; then into the perceptual conditions of an art object defined in terms less of a given medium than of a given space, as in Minimalist art; then into the material basis of such artmaking and perceiving, as explored variously by Arte Povera, Process art, and Body art. Along the way, Conceptual art also shifted attention away from the specific conventions of painting and sculpture to the general questions of “art as art” and “art as an institution.”

At first the institution of art was understood mostly in physical terms, as the actual spaces of art studio, gallery, and museum, and artists worked to underscore these parameters and/or to expand them. One thinks of the systematic exposés of these art spaces by Michael Asher, Dan Graham, Marcel Broodthaers, and Daniel Buren, who also wrote an important set of critical texts on such subjects. Such “institutional critique” revealed that the institution of art was not only a physical space but also a network of discourses (including criticism, journalism, and publicity) that intersected with other discourses, indeed with other institutions (including the media and the corporation). It also suggested that the viewer of art could not be defined strictly in perceptual terms, for he or she was also a social subject marked by multiple differences of class, race, and gender—a point stressed by feminist artists above all others. Of course, this expansion of the definitions of art and institution, artist and viewer, was also driven by social developments (especially the civil rights and feminist movements early on, and postcolonial and queer politics later), as well as by theoretical critiques of the oppositions of high and low culture and modernist and mass art. Together these forces, both internal and external to art, prompted a wider engagement of the culture at large. Thus was the field of art and criticism expanded to “cultural studies,” with culture understood in an almost anthropological sense.

This sequence of investigations can also be understood as a set of transformations involving the site of art: from the surface of painting and the armature of sculpture to the structure of the studio, gallery or museum, as well as to the alternative spaces of

site-specific installations and the distant locations of Earthworks. Here, too, a gradual shift occurred from a literal, physical understanding of site to a more abstract, discursive understanding—to the point where, in the late eighties and early nineties, artists and critics could treat desire or death, AIDS or homelessness, as so many sites for art projects. Along with this expanded notion of site came an expanded operation of “mapping,” which also ranged from the literal to the discursive—for example, from the cartographic markings of (semi)natural sites by Robert Smithson and others to the sociological mappings of (sub)urban sites by Dan Graham and others (such as his *Homes for America* [1966–7], a magazine report of the “Minimalist” structures to be found in a tract-housing development in New Jersey).

### An ethnographic turn

Sociological mapping became more programmatic in institutional critique during the seventies, especially in the work of Hans Haacke. Haacke moved from profile polls of gallery and museum visitors and archival exposés of real-estate moguls in New York (1969–73), to detailed reports of the successive owners of particular paintings by Manet and Seurat (1974–5), to continued investigations of the financial and ideological arrangements made by museums, corporations, and governments. Such work questioned these social authorities incisively, but it did not often reflect on its own sociological authority, its own voice of truth. This reflexivity was more pronounced with artists, such as Martha Rosler, who were involved in a critique of documentary modes of representation as somehow transparent to the world. In her phototext work *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974–5), Rosler mimicked documentary photographs as well as sociological descriptions of alcoholic destitution in order to show the “inadequacy” of both “descriptive systems” in the face of this recalcitrant social problem.

In feminist art the suspicion of documentary representation converged with an elaboration of institutional critique in the work of such artists as Louise Lawler and Silvia Kolbowski. This convergence was complicated by an interest in quasi-ethnographic modes of fieldwork, as some artists assumed the roles of both

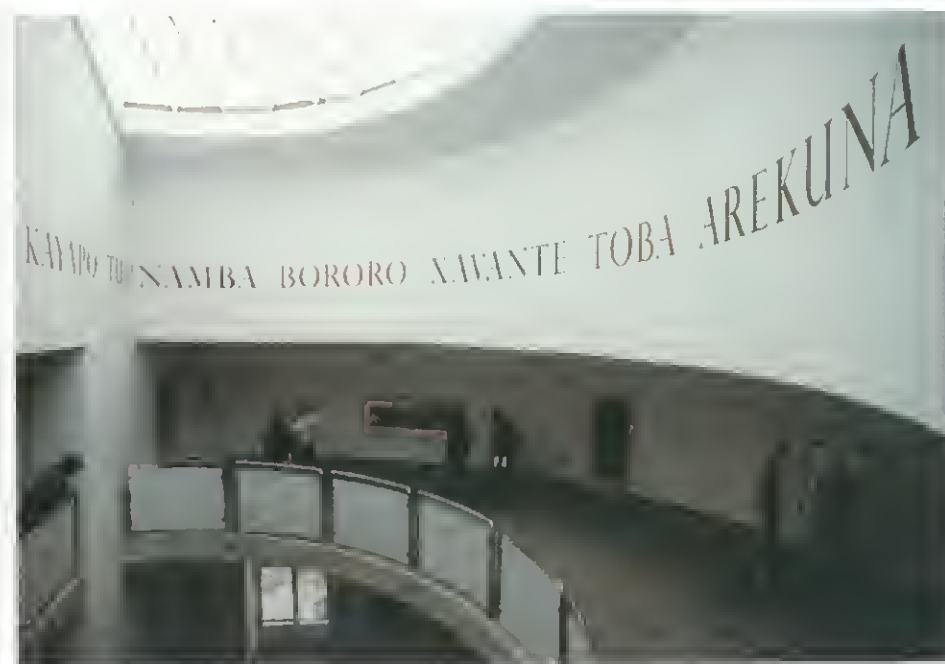
ethnographer and native-informant in everyday life under patriarchy. (A few of these artists, like Susan Hiller [born 1942], were trained in anthropology.) It was in this manner that Mary Kelly reported on patriarchal conventions of language, schooling, artmaking, and aging in such projects as *Post-Partum Document* (1973–9) and *Interim* (1985–9). By the early nineties art based on personal reportage, fieldwork and/or archival research had become pervasive, as more and more artists were invited to do site-specific projects at museums and related institutions around the world. The combination of the nomadic condition of the artist and the project basis of the art made installation the preferred mode of this work.

There were several reasons for this ethnographic turn in some art of the nineties, such as an involvement in nonart forms of cultural representation that was also encouraged by the growth of cultural studies in the academy. Yet anthropology also possessed its own attractions for artists and critics alike. First, anthropology is the discipline that takes *culture* as its object, and this expanded field of operations was desired by many postmodernist artists. Second, anthropology is *contextual* in nature, another attribute much valued in recent art and criticism. Third, it is seen as intrinsically *interdisciplinary*, a further characteristic prized in such practice. Fourth, it is a discipline that studies *otherness*, which has made anthropology, along with psychoanalysis, the common language of much recent art and criticism. And, finally, the *critique* of “ethnographic authority” launched in the eighties also rendered anthropology attractive, for it suggests a special self-awareness on the part of the ethnographic artist.

Such self-awareness was essential for artists who took up the model of fieldwork. Lothar Baumgarten (born 1944) was one of the first to do so in his mappings of indigenous cultures of North and South America, which were often based on his extensive

travels. In several projects over the last two decades, Baumgarten has inscribed the names of native societies of both continents—names often imposed by explorers and ethnographers alike—onto various settings. These sites have ranged from Northern museums (such as the neoclassical dome of the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany, in 1982 [1] and the modernist spiral of the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1993) to Southern settings (such as in Caracas, Venezuela) that Baumgarten has sometimes marked with the names of threatened local species and extracted raw materials as well. The names of the various native societies often appeared somewhat distorted in these installations, with letters placed upside down or reversed, as if to underscore the historical misrepresentation of these groups, but also to challenge this misrepresentation in the present. Thus in Kassel the mute Indian names seemed to suggest that the other side of Old World Enlightenment (as evoked by the neoclassical dome of the museum) was New World Conquest. Meanwhile in New York these names seemed to suggest that some other mapping of the globe (as evoked by the spiral of the Frank Lloyd Wright building) was required, one without hierarchies of North and South or modern and primitive.

The last examples point to a potential problem with these quasi-ethnographic projects: they are often commissioned by the museums, and it can appear as if these institutions import this kind of critique as a substitute for an analysis that they might have undertaken internally. This complication has led some critics to declare institutional critique recuperated by the museums, and the flurry of international shows of commissioned site-specific projects in the mid-to-late nineties did not contradict this view (this trend culminated in the 1999 survey at the Museum of Modern Art with the telling title “The Museum as Muse”). On the other hand, this location within the museum is necessary if these



1 • Lothar Baumgarten, *Documenta* installation project, rotunda of the Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, 1982



projects are to remap its space or to reconfigure its audience in any way; indeed, this internal position is a premise of all work that purports to be deconstructive. And this argument held for the most incisive of these projects, such as *Mining the Museum* by Fred Wilson (born 1954).

### The artist as curator

In *Mining the Museum*, sponsored by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Baltimore, Wilson took an ethnographic approach to the Maryland Historical Society. First he explored its collection of historical artifacts, especially ones deemed marginal and placed in storage; this excavating was a first meaning of the “mining” in the title. Then he reclaimed certain objects in the collection, most evocative of African-American experiences, which were not part of the official history on display; this repossessing was a second kind of “mining.” Finally he reframed still other objects that were already part of the official history. For example, in an existing exhibit of exquisite goblets and pitchers captioned “Metalwork 1793–1880” [2], Wilson placed a rough pair of slave manacles found in storage; this third kind of “mining” wrenched the objects on view into a different context of meaning, from one kind of ownership to another. In this way Wilson served as an anthropologist not only of the Maryland Historical Society but also of the African-American communities not adequately represented there—a situation that the Society at least began to ameliorate through this very exhibition. Wilson had previously worked as a curator; as an artist he has continued this work, critically, by other means.

Andrea Fraser (born 1965) is best known for her barbed performances of various art-world types, including the curator, but she has also made several ethnographic probes into museum culture. In *Aren't They Lovely* (1992), for example, she reopened a private bequest to the art museum of the University of California at Berkeley in order to investigate how the heterogeneous domestic objects of a specific collector (from everyday eyeglasses to Renoir paintings) are transformed into the homogeneous public culture of a general art museum. Whereas Wilson has focused on the problem of institutional repression, here Fraser addressed the process of institutional sublimation; in both cases the artists play with museology in order first to expose and then to reframe the institutional codings of art and artifacts—how specific objects are translated into historical evidence and/or cultural exemplars by museums, invested as such with meaning and value, and for what constituencies this is done (or not done).

Renée Green (born 1959) has also adopted an ethnographic approach, in a way that often extends beyond the art museum. In her site-specific projects she has focused on the residues of racism, sexism, and colonialism that remain inscribed in various kinds of representations: popular movies and travel literature, domestic decor and institutional architecture, as well as private collections and museum displays. A few of her installations have sketched a critical genealogy of the principal figure of primitivist

- ▲ racism, sexism, and colonialism that remain inscribed in various kinds of representations: popular movies and travel literature, domestic decor and institutional architecture, as well as private collections and museum displays. A few of her installations have sketched a critical genealogy of the principal figure of primitivist
- fantasy, the exotic and erotic female, from the “Hottentot Venus,” a nineteenth-century European stereotype of an excessive African sexuality, to the American jazz dancer Josephine Baker, who
- enthralled young modernists like Le Corbusier in the Paris of the



2 • Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992 (detail)  
Slave manacles placed in metalwork display

▲ 1993c ● 1903, 1907 ■ 1925a

### Interdisciplinarity

Many positions in postwar art are articulated between or across the mediums and the disciplines: one thinks of the experiments at Black Mountain College, the aesthetics of John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, the investigations of the Independent Group and the Situationists, the various practices of assemblage, happenings, and environments, as well as such disparate movements as Fluxus, Neoconcretism, Nouveau Réalisme, Minimalism, Process art, Performance art, video, and so on. Some of these practices recovered precedents from the prewar period that either attacked traditional art forms, like Dada and Surrealism, or sought to transform them utterly, like Constructivism. But they also reacted against a strong reading of modernist art that understood its mission to be the perceptual refinement of the specific mediums (e.g., the “opticality” of painting). “The concepts of quality and value—and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself—are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only *within* the individual arts,” Michael Fried insisted, famously, in his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood.” “What lies *between* the arts is theater.” Clearly he had in mind some of the aforementioned practices, whose interdisciplinary methods and temporal involvements (“theatrical” in his lexicon) he deemed improper to visual art.

Yet this opposition overlooks several forces even more important to the general tendency toward interdisciplinary art over the last four decades. First, there was the inspiration of both the critique of political institutions and the expansion of cultural spaces in the social movements of the sixties and seventies—student, civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements above all. Second, along with a crossing of mediums there was an erosion in hierarchies at this time—of high and low forms, elite and popular audiences, fine and media arts (we tend to forget, in the midst of our own technological retoolings, that the sixties and seventies experienced great transformations in this respect too). Third, there were, especially in the eighties, the interdisciplinary provocations of poststructuralist theory—a loose term that

gathered together such disparate thinkers as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. However different their interests, all these figures practiced a critical suspicion of whatever appeared to be originary and authoritative, purely proper and simply present—a suspicion that was extended to artistic forms and institutional frames, and without which postmodernism could not have been theorized. Finally, there was, in the nineties, the effect of postcolonial discourse, which elaborated the poststructuralist deconstruction of conceptual oppositions in the political context of decolonialization—a deconstruction of such binaries as First World and Third World, center and periphery, and Occident and Orient. In related art, critiques of identity and notions of hybridity came to the fore.

The latter two developments are sometimes described, respectively, as a semiotic turn, in which the linguistic sign is the privileged term of analysis, and an ethnographic turn, in which cultural practice becomes the primary object of study. In the first instance, some artists, architects, filmmakers, and critics adapted semiotic models in order to rethink their work in textual terms. And in the second instance they did much the same thing with anthropological notions of culture. Sometimes, it must be admitted, these exchanges followed a used-car principle whereby, as one practice or discipline wore out a paradigm, it passed it on to another; but such exchanges also greatly expanded the fields of art and criticism alike. In the present, however, both fields show signs of a stalled relativism in which no one paradigm is strong enough to orient practice, or to make for relevant debate with any real purchase on the culture at large. Moreover, the inflation of design and spectacle in contemporary art and architecture sometimes appears as part of a greater revenge of advanced capitalism on the expanded fields of postmodernist culture—a recouping of its crossings of arts and disciplines, a routinization of its transgressions. Not long ago, when late modernism seemed to petrify into medium-specificity, postmodernism promised an interdisciplinary opening. What might renew postmodernism in turn?

twenties. In *Seen* [3] Green had the viewer stand on a special platform in order to see her images of these women, which in effect aligned the contemporary spectator with the historical voyeur of such figures—one could not assume a moral superiority with temporal distance. Green has also focused our gaze on aspects of primitivism closer to the present: in *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992), for example, she explored our urban legends concerning hip-hop culture music and black masculinity.

Mark Dion (born 1961) has taken the ethnographic approach even further afield: the “culture” that he studies is that of nature—how it is studied in science, represented in fiction, and staged in natural history museums. For Dion nature is “one of the most sophisticated arenas for the production of ideology,” and his projects attempt to expose aspects of this production with techniques inspired by various artists and intellectuals—the wry fictional

▲ museums of Broodthaers, the site/non-site strategies of Smithson, the historical investigations of scientific discourses of Michel

- Foucault, and so on. For all its criticism of the ecological disasters precipitated by colonial history and postcolonial economics, his art is hardly one of disdainful critique: Dion is also an avid amateur, with his own collections of insects and other curiosities often on display; his work has drawn, too, on his many trips to the tropics and elsewhere. In this manner Dion plays the naturalist and the environmentalist in ways that are both straight and sardonic. Most often his installations have taken the form of works in progress, and they exist somewhere between a site in the field, the home office of a bizarre naturalist, and a finished museum display [4]. “I take raw materials out of the world and then act upon them in the space of the gallery,” Dion has remarked. “When the collection is complete, when I’ve run out of space or raw material or time, the work is finished.”

▲ Introduction 4, 1970, 1972a ● 1971





3 • Renée Green, *Seen*, 1990  
Wood structure, height 207 x 207 x 136  
(81 1/2 x 81 1/2 x 53 1/2), lens, hologram,  
screen, light, and audio system

4 • Renée Green, *Seen*, 1990 (detail)  
Wood structure, height 207 x 207 x 136  
(81 1/2 x 81 1/2 x 53 1/2), lens, hologram,  
screen, light, and audio system



4 • Mark Dion, *Flotsam and Jetsam (The End of the Game)*, 1994  
Mixed-media installation

Each of these artists complicates the ethnographic approach with other models: Fraser is interested in the sociology of art pioneered by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; Green, in the postcolonial discourse of critics like Homi Bhabha; Dion, in the study of disciplines developed by Foucault; and so on. But the ethnographic turn in recent art has also raised certain questions. The quasi-anthropological role set up for the artist can promote a presuming of ethnographic authority as much as a questioning of it. In some instances the artist might be asked to represent a neglected community, only to stand in for this community at the museum, and so confirm as much as contest its absence there. The curatorial role might also prompt an evading of institutional critique as much as an extending of it. In some instances the artist might become a curator • for hire, an adviser in an educational program, or even a consultant in a public-relations campaign. Indeed, the nineties witnessed the rise not only of the artist-as-curator but of the complementary figure of the curator-as-artist, whose orchestration of a show or a set of site-specific projects often appeared to be the primary creative act. This development of curating as a pervasive “medium” of contemporary art suggests an uncertainty about the domains of artmaking and curating alike, just as the development of socially site-specific projects bespeaks an anxiety about the status of the public not only for art museums but for contemporary art in general.

There is a final question about this ethnographic turn that bears consideration. Such art is impressively inventive and smartly con-

tingent: “We hold dear the belief,” Dion has commented, “that our production can have many different forms of expression—making a film, teaching, writing, producing a public project, doing something for a newspaper, curating or presenting a discrete work in a gallery.” But sometimes its very multiplicity might confuse its audience, or invite the charge that it is dilettantish. Moreover, with art conceived in terms of projects, and projects conceived in terms of discursive sites, these artists might be led to work horizontally, in a lateral movement from social issue to issue, or from political debate to debate, more than vertically, in a diachronic engagement with the historical forms of a genre, medium, or art. Granted, a strict focus on its own intrinsic problems can lead to an art that is involuted and detached, but a strict focus on extrinsic debates can lead art to forget its own repertoire of forms, its own memory of meanings—to relinquish the critical possibilities of its own semi-autonomous sites.

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